**The human will and the sovereignty of God**

**Piet Guijt**

**1. Introduction**

Does man have man a free will? This is a question with which many people have struggled during the centuries. Also nowadays it is a very pertinent issue. Recently, the entire Saturday supplement of a Dutch newspaper was devoted to the theme (1). In November 2011, the Christian Association of Psychiatrists, Psychologists and Psychotherapists (CVPPP) organized a conference, where free will was one of the themes. The neurobiologist and brain researcher Dick Swaab, known because of his best-selling book ‘We are our brain’, denies the existence of free will and calls this an illusion, albeit a pleasant one. His view is partly due to his atheistic materialism (there is only matter and there is no dualism of matter and mind) (2) that sooner or later ends in determinism. Other neuroscientists (e.g. Kolk (3)) believe that free will does exist.

Whether or not free will exists is related to the question of how far people can be held accountable for their (wrong) actions. Of course, one must define what is meant by (free) will and what choices are involved. A moral choice (ethics) is quite different than the choice of the vegetable which one will eat today etc.. It should also be noted that not all acts are performed consciously. Fortunately there are also automatic, routine and intuitive actions, for example driving and sports. This is not inconsistent with responsible behavior. It applies to what has been learned previously and what one has chosen, for example driving lessons. Moreover, human life would not be possible without various automatic actions.

Although some neuroscientists claim that there is no free will, any sane person, and certainly someone who takes the Bible seriously, should assume that man has been created with a will and that he is a morally responsible creature. "If you deny man’s responsibility, you not only reduce him to a brute, but it also means the end of each public morality and the rule of law" (4).

Obviously, in the broken creation caused by the fall, no man is completely free. Sometimes one is not able to do what one would wish. Think of situations, for example, imprisonment, torture and persecution. Consider also having obsessions or certain addictions, which are caused by sin. So the free will can be affected by sin, can be misdirected, but still there is a certain freedom to choose, for example to choose, sometimes with the help of others, to be liberated from certain bondages.

**2. Relationship between God and man**

Also in the religious field, the question concerning the free will of man has always been on the agenda, but especially in relation to (the sovereignty of) God. If there is a free will, can this free wil be compatible with the sovereignty of God? Many books have been written on this topic, both by philosophers (5) and by theologians. There was even (400 years ago) a battle going on between the professors Arminius and Gomarus in which the doctrine of predestination (see below) was the central theme. That fight led to a schism and the creation of the Remonstrant (6). At that time there was also a debate between Luther (7) and Erasmus, and in derivative sense between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants, which led to the drafting of the Canons of Dordrecht in 1619 (8).

It is very important to have a good view on the human free will (and thus the responsibility of man) because it also affects certain theological doctrines and teachings. In the following, the choice of man is seen in relation to his eternal destiny. Obviously, we do not mean a single choice but the whole of ones choices in ones’s lifetime.

First we will look at three views because it is very instructive in the sense that we can see how the Bible can be interpreted incorrectly by an erroneous vision of the will of man, and how important it is to have the light of the Holy Spirit in reading and understanding the Bible.

**3. The doctrine that man cannot repent himself**

In some Christian circles it is thought that the man cannot repent, cannot choose himself, because they will first have to wait for God's intervention. Someone might say: "I am waiting until it pleases the Lord to convert me" and one refers to texts like John 6:44 a where one can read: "No man can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him". In those circles they often think negative about man, for he is dead because of sin, totally depraved by the fall and with nothing good in him. However, depravity is confused with lostness. Indeed the sinful man is lost by sin, because by (even a single) sin there already is a separation between God and man, who loses (misses) the glory of God. But that does not necessarily mean that man could not do any good. After all, if man would be totally depraved, he would be like the devil himself. Fortunately, God can reach people by His Word and Spirit and they can be made alive spiritually. For the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and man can be open for it. The Word of God calls us to repent and to believe the gospel (Mark 1:15). God initiated the salvation of man by sending Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God to this world and now it is up to man to respond. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Jesus knocks at the door of our hearts. We must do open. And Hebr. 11:6 tells us that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Man can not hide himself behind passivity.

**4. The doctrine of predestination (theological determinism)**

The doctrine of predestination, also known as the doctrine of divine election, is saying that God has determined\* in advance who would be and who would not be saved forever (double predestination). (\* A completely different view of this subject is the following: God does not decide in advance who is or is not lost, but knows in principle in advance who (= what kind of people) will be lost or not, just as a scientist can predict (based on a certain pattern): if someone does 'a', then 'x' is the result, and if someone does 'b' then 'y' is the result). According to the supporters of the doctrine of predestination a free will of man cannot exist, because God then would not be omnipotent. They think that God would be weak if many people did not allow Him to save them, and that in this way the will of the creature would be omnipotent. If one would say that people do not want to obey God, then God's power would fail, and Jesus Christ would not have all power in heaven and on earth. Then satan would seem more powerful than God. Therefore it can only be true that God Himself has chosen certain people and certain others not, according the supporters of the doctrine of election, of which there are various variants. Later, we will explain why this presentation is incorrect.

Theologians as Calvin and later Rev. Pink (9) are known supporters of the doctrine of predestination. Suporters refer to various Scriptures that would give the idea that God has predestined only certain people to eternal life. Some examples are texts like Eph. 1:11 ("In whom we have also obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will"), Rom. 8:28 ("And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose"), and 1 Pet. 1:2 a (" ... the elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father "). Supporters point to texts that seem to say that the Lord hardened the heart of people and has predestined them to do so.

People read these Bible verses apparently with colored (not to say blurred) glasses, because on closer inspection we see that the alleged texts do not support the vision of the followers. It is sometimes amazing to see how the Bible is (mis) interpreted because of a certain vision (fallacy). They do not read the texts in the context, or one overlooks other texts or one does not see that predestination as mentioned in for example Rom. 9 is not about the eternal destiny of people, but an election to a particular purpose (10), so about how God unfolds His plan of salvation in the course of time. Or one overlooks the fact that God has meant that people are chosen in Christ (Eph.1).

But, thanks to God, each man is allowed to know that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16) and God wants everyone tob e saved, as we can read in 1 Tim. 2: 3 and 4: " For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth". God leaves the choice to man, because He Himself has chosen to give a will to man. If people are lost, it is because they would not repent and did not want to be redeemed (see e.g. Isa. 30:15 and Revelation 21:8). Professor W. Verboom (11) states: "God rejects ( only) those who reject Him".

Unfortunately the (double) predestination doctrine has had a disastrous effect for centuries, but nowadays it is not an issue as the modern and empowered human no longer accepts this doctrine. Therefore the wicked has to use a different attack, and comes with universalism, that says that all people will be saved. After all, they say, it cannot be that a loving God will let people be lost forever. This doctrine fits very well with the postmodern thinking that everyone has his own truth, and the perception that there are more roads to God, and that it will be well with everyone.

**5. The universalism**

The universalism (there are several variants) says that all people will be saved, because it would be dishonoring to God that a tiny creature as man could resist God. God is still stronger than the will of man? Is it possible that the will of man could frustrate God by which His divine purpose cannot be achieved? Then the will of God to accomplish His plan would be thwarted by the unwillingness of man, according to a fervent supporter of the universalism (12). We will show below why this is a misrepresentation. Moreover, we see once again in the universalism a certain (erroneous) conception of the will of man. Theologians who tend toward a form of universalism include Barth, Berkhof and Berkouwer (13). In this context also the book "Love Wins" by Rob Bell can be mentioned (14).

Texts used by advocates of this doctrine include: Joh. 12:32 ("And if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to me"), Titus 2:11 ("For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men"), 1 Tim. 2:4: "Who wants all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth") and 1 Cor. 15:22 ("For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive"). Supporters of the universalism conclude from these texts that all people will be saved, but they forget that the salvation that God offers has to be accepted by the sinful man. God leaves to man the choice to accept His offer of grace or not. See for example Deut. 28 on the blessing and the curse.

Moreover, the universalism is inconsistent with texts like for example: "And then I will declare to them, I never knew you: depart from me, you who do evil" ( Mat. 7:23), ".. if you do not believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sin" (John 8:24 b), " In flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and who refuse to accept the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who will be punished with unending destruction away from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his might" (2 Thess.1:8 and 9) and “those who perish, because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10).

We do not endorse the universalism (how gladly a human being would like to do so from his personal feelings) (15), but then of course the question is: who will be lost ? With the supporters of the universalism we also believe that people who have never heard the gospel, will not be automatically condemnedto hell. That judgment is not incumbent upon man, but to God. And that we can safely leave to Him, for He will judge righteously. Although God will do everything to reach these people, we must according to the Bible note, that those who knowingly and willingly would prefer darkness above light, and continue to reject Jesus as their Redeemer, will be lost.

It is noteworthy that both the supporters of the doctrine of predestination as of universalism deny the free will of man, because that free will would undermine and insult God's omnipotence and sovereignty. According the first doctrine, God makes a limiting choice and according the other doctrine, God preserves everyone. In both cases, man himself apparently has no choice. Moreover, one may wonder whether there are not other reasons to deny the free will, for example, the fear of being haughty to God, or to evade responsibility.

The brief discussion of the above three perspectives, all of which rely on certain Bible texts, shows how important it is to know God's Word and to read texts in the context (and not just some loose snippets) and how necessary it is to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in reading and understanding the Bible. Knowing the loving and righteous heart of God is indispensable. Also a good view on the relationship between the will of God and that of man is needed.

**6. The sovereignty of God and the will of man**

We now will turn to the question whether the sovereignty of God and the will and responsibility of man are compatible with each other or not.

What is the sovereignty of God? It means that God is not subject to anything else. God is sovereign in the sense that nothing can call Him to account. He has absolute control. That does not mean arbitrariness, because God's sovereignty is associated with God's perfection, wisdom, love, justice and holiness. God keeps His own laws, if not He Himself would be lawless. God has chosen to give to man a free will with which man can choose. This man can either be obedient or disobedient to the will of God. This is already seen in Gen. 3 where the (then sinless!) man was tempted by the serpent (or chose himself to be seduced by the serpent).

What is the will of man and how far would it be free? The human free will is a property that belongs to our existence as human beings and has its foundation in the creation of man in God's image. God created man as a reasonable moral being, for whom there are certain moral standards in force, which however can be rejected (not obeyed)(16). The will is not something that is unambiguous. It may relate to various aspects, namely: a) to determine (for example someone’s will is law), b) to wish, to desire (for example to follow a certain study; what one wishes or desires can be possible or unfeasible) and c) to choose out of available options, which one can accept or reject. We will not go into the freedom of will that man has for example to follow a particular study, profession, residence, friends or choosing a holiday destination. God gives that possiblities to the natural man. But we will look to the will of man in relation to God, so concerning to moral, ethical choices. The fact that man can choose is not contrary to God’s authority, because His counsel and providence are so large and powerful that there is place for man with his moral freedom without imposing upon God's government and sovereignty (17). Prof. W. Verboom says correctly that God’s choice for man and man’s choice for God should not be set in opposition to each other. Sometimes in a particular question (like, for example, the relationship between God’s omni-potence and man’s free will) there is the possibility of confusion of terms which leads to incompatibility.

With regard to the will of man, one might say: "But someone who is addicted to e.g. smoking or drinking, does he have free will?" (you should say: no longer a free will, because before the addiction developed, there was clearly an element of free will, even though that could have been put under pressure by certain conditions). Indeed, in the case of addiction there is a certain bondage, because every bond of sin makes the will of man bound to a certain extent. But with the free part of the will man can still take a decision, make a choice in a moral sense (though perhaps only occasionally). That is repentance, being open to God's Word and what God wants and can do through the power of His Holy Spirit, by which God can bring man (increasingly) into freedom.

Above we saw that the adherents of the three visions mentioned see the free will of man as it were, almost as a kind of insult to God. We will indicate below why the free will of man does not affect the sovereignty of God. God Himself has chosen to give to man the free choice to obey or not to obey Him. Therefore Hebr. 5:9 says: "He became to all who obey Him the source of eternal salvation". God's promises and prophecies for persons are indeed conditional. God respects the will of man. Since He has deliberately chosen that in His sovereign will. God is a God of love. He wants a love relationship with man. Love leaves people free to choose who to love and to accept it with grace and in humility and great gratitude, or to reject it arrogant and stubbornly. God does not want us to be robots or puppets, but that we want to do His will wholeheartedly by free choice and out of love for Him (18).

**7. Misunderstandings and their solution**

The fact that man has a free will, does not mean that the will of God and the will of man are on the same level . Man ultimately has nothing to want (in the sense of determing something) but can only accept or reject what God wants. Man can only choose for or against God, in other words, choose in which system he gets. Either in the system of God (and that ultimately gives true freedom, happiness and true life) or in the system of satan, and so of sin, that is any deviation from God's purpose for man (and that deviation brings misery and death).

But if the man can choose with his will, what then is the relationship between the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and the work of God through the Holy Spirit on one hand, and the human will and responsibility on the other? In earlier times (but even now) one could not always reconcile that, and one was (is) afraid that people would think that the human will as such would be able to bring about salvation and that man could boast about his cooperation with the Spirit of God. On the other hand we can say that the will of man as such is certainly not enough to be saved, because

before that decision of man precedes the will of God that men are to be saved, and Who has made ​​that possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So it is not in the ability of man to save himself, but only by accepting the grace that God offers in Jesus Christ. Only by that can he participate in the salvation. And only then can the man again can grow spiritually in total dependence on the Holy Spirit. But man must (with its own will) choose to open or to exclude himself for that.

Compare it with a tap, which one can open or close. The opening the tap as such gives no water (if there is no water behind it), but it does give access to the water that is already in the pipeline (because someone else, in this example the waterworks, has provided it) and by the opening of the tap the water can flow. Another image is that of the trolley, which can only drive as the bow is pressed (human will) against the high voltage wire, and if there is power at the high voltage wire (God's provision in Jesus Christ). So if there is no power in the overhead wires, even if you press so the bow to the wire very firmly, the bus will not (can not) drive. Jesus said: "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me" (John 15:5 ). But this does not mean that the 'role' of choice, the decision of will of man, has disappeared.

There has often been confusion because one did not see the difference between willpower and the decision (choice) of will. Some people refer to Romans 9:16 which says: "It is not of him, if someone wants, or whether someone runs, but of God that shows mercy". That text means to say that we can do nothing in our own strengh. They confuse doing something in their own strength and therefore own willpower, with the decision to be depending on God. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish between will as effort and the will (choice) to surrender to Him, so to trust himself to God. The latter is what God requires of us. God wants our salvation, but He has given us a free will, an ability to choose. Even though we can do nothing without God's grace and power, God does not force us to choose His will, but yet He works in us to will, that is, that He helps us to want the good.

A simple illustration can make clear the relationship between what God does and what man should do. As an example we take a switch on a railway line. The switch can be put to the left (bad situation) or to the right (good situation). The pulling of the handle next to the switch is the image of decision of will, the choice of man. The man knows from God's Word that the switch has to be put to the right, and man wants that too, and he pulls with all his might to the handle of the switch to get it in the correct position. But both the rails of the switch as the lever are stuck. There is no movement possible. So the man can not put that lever in his own strength, in his own willpower in the good direction. What now needs to happen is that both the rails of the switch as the lever are lubricated with oil to make loose the switch and lever. You could, with permission, say that calling for the help of the power of the Holy Spirit is to apply that oil. Without the power of God, man can not put the switch in the right position. God wants man to ask Him for that strength, so wants man to be depending on Him. But what God Himself does not do is pulling the lever. That is what man must do himself.

God from His love encourages man to turn the switch to the right so a good choice to make ("For it is God who works in you both to will and to do his good pleasure", says Filip. 2:13), making life moving in the right direction. But man himself must grasp the handle and put it in a different position. God does not do that for us, because God precisely wants that man himself makes the (moral) choice. But God wants to make it possible that man can shift the lever, setting the switch in the correct position. From this simple illustration we see that both the power of God and the choice of man for or against God (‘s help) play a role.

Finally, we would like to discuss a (false) argument of supporters of univerlism. It highlights the resistance of man with his free will as if the recalcitrant human could resist God in eternity. Then God would be the loser and man the victor. But the answer is that man could think that he might resist himself in this time unpunished against God, but at the end of the grace period, so at the final judgment, the final separation, God will say to the man who would not submit to Him: "Your will be done" (19), and that means going to the place where God is not: the eternal situaton without God, thus hell. After all that man did not want to do God's will, so did not want to be in the presence of God. But then that man will regret it, and then it's too late. And that will result in eternal torment. Whether people do or do not submit themselves to God, God will be forever the Almighty God and His Kingdom will come and will be everlasting. The people who continued to oppose God, rather do their own thing, and refuse to acknowledge that they are dependent on God, are no winners but losers.

**8. Final word?**

Hence the passionate appeal in the Bible: "Do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:8 and 15: 4:7). This implies that a person may choose to go against God (even if that ultimately means for that man the eternal lostness), so having a free will and therefore responsible for his choice. Basically there is salvation for all people, but God has given man a will. Human beings have the choice, even if it costs the fight against the flesh and self. That is why the Bible says: "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were called" (1 Timothy 6:12) and "choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15).

I want to conclude with a statement of Neil and Joanne Anderson (20): "Being guided by the Holy Spirit does not mean that you are free to do what you want (which can mean licentiousness), but that you are finally free to lead a responsible, moral life (according to God's protecting directives of life) (which is true freedom) - something that you were not able to do when you were a prisoner of your flesh”.

**© Piet Guijt**

Zoetermeer, March 2014

Notes:

1.‘Ja, ik wil…’, Saturday Supplement of the Nederlands Dagblad, 15 October 2011.

2. Djoni de Vos, Hoe bedoelt u: vrije wil?,Nederlands Dagblad, 10 September 2010

3. Afscheidsrede prof. dr. H. Kolk, [**http://socsi.kun.nl/**](http://socsi.kun.nl/)~kolk/redekolk.pdf

4. Uit vrije wil? Comment by Peter Bergwerff, Nederlands Dagblad, 8 September 2011

5. See e.g.Vrije wil, Wikipedia [**http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrije\_wil**](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrije_wil)

6. Nederlands Dagblad, Wednesday 24 March 2004.

7. Luther wanted, impressed by his experience of the supremacy of God's grace, to avoid any suggestion that humans could contribute to his salvation, and therefore he was close to a radical denial of the free will of man. (Dick Schinkelshoek, Een vrije wil is nog geen goede wil, Nederlands Dagblad, 15 October 2011)

8. Uit vrije wil?Commentaar Peter Bergwerff,Nederlands Dagblad, 8 September 2011

9. Pink, A.W., De soevereiniteit van God. Edited by: De Banier van Waarheid, Rotterdam, not dated

10. For Wesley ‘being chosen’ means: choosen to fulfill a certain mission. See Soteria, December 2003, p. 31

11. Prof. Verboom was professor ‘Geschiedenis van het Gereformeerd Protestantisme’ in Leiden

12. Manuscript, not published, by J. A. van Arkel in Zoetermeer

13. Hemel of hel. Onze eeuwige bestemming (Heaven or hell. Our eternal destination). Theologische Verkenningen Bijbel en Praktijk, edited by drs. A.G. Knevel, Kok Voorhoeve, Kampen 1991, p. 67 t/m 92

14. Rob Bell, Love Wins, 2011

15. C.S Lewis said: “Er is geen leerstuk, dat ik, als ik dat kon, liever uit het christendom zou willen verwijderen” (There is no doctrine that I, if I could, would rather remove from Christianity). Quotation quoted by dr. J. Hoek. In: ‘Hemel of hel. Onze eeuwige bestemming’ (Heaven or hell. Our eternal destination). Theologische Verkenningen Bijbel en Praktijk onder redactie van drs. A.G. Knevel, Kok Voorhoeve, Kampen 1991, pag. 14

16. Christelijke Encyclopedie, J.H. Kok N.V. Kampen 1961, part 6, p. 539

17. Christelijke Encyclopedie, J.H. Kok N.V. Kampen 1961, part 6, p. 540

18. See also the review of John Wesley by prof. dr. Jean-Pierre van Noppen in Soteria, December 2003, p. 28

19. Part of a quote of C.S. Lewis mentioned by dr. J. Hoek. In: ‘Hemel of hel. Onze eeuwige bestemming’ (Heaven or hell. Our eternal destination). Theologische Verkenningen Bijbel en Praktijk onder redactie van drs. A.G. Knevel, Kok Voorhoeve, Kampen 1991, p. 15

20. Neil en Joanne Anderson, Elke dag in Christus, Bijbels Dagboek, Herstelteam, 2010, p. 61